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# FAITH & FORM

JOURNAL OF THE INTERFAITH FORUM  
ON RELIGION, ART AND ARCHITECTURE  
VOL. XXXIV • NO. 3, 2001 • ISSN 00147001



West Meets East



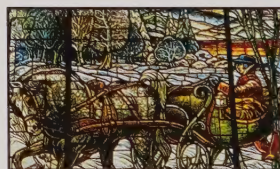


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**Manuscript Submission:** The editor is pleased to review manuscripts for possible publication. Any subject material relevant to art and architecture is welcome. Good visual material is emphasized. Articles may be submitted on disk along with hard copy or e-mailed to: [FaithNForm@aol.com](mailto:FaithNForm@aol.com). Manuscripts, disks and photos will not be returned unless specifically requested and a return envelope with sufficient postage is included.

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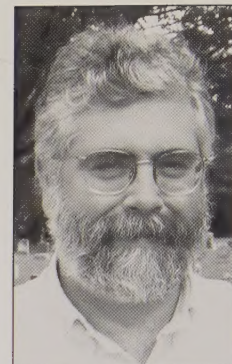
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# ISSUES PAST AND PRESENT

Michael J. Crosbie




The previous issue of *Faith & Form* was a special retrospective on this journal's history, and we appreciate the enthusiastic response from architects, artists, designers, liturgical consultants, clergy, and others that we have received about its content. However, we neglected to mention in that issue the critical financial support by the American Institute of Architects' College of Fellows, which made the Retrospective possible. Through the generosity of the College of Fellows in awarding a grant to *Faith & Form*, we were able to significantly defray the cost of this special issue. We apologize to the College of Fellows for the oversight.

This present issue takes as its focus the meeting of West and East—particularly, the art and architecture of faith traditions from the East that have established a foothold in the United States and continue to grow. We had decided on this theme of West meets East months before the catastrophic events of September 11, 2001. But now, it seems that this issue carries an even greater import than it did before that date. Greater knowl-

edge of each other and of the different religious cultures that we come from can only help mitigate the violence and intolerance around us. Architect Joe McCall's story of the design and construction of the Dawoodi Bohra Mosque is an eloquent testament to East and West working together to create something of beauty and lasting value. Scholar Christiane Gruber evokes the poetry of traditional Islamic architecture in the Dar al-Islam Mosque Complex in New Mexico. Architect Raj Saksena relates the faith traditions and practices of Vedanta and how they are reflected in the design of a new center in Rhode Island. Artist Joseph Malham shows us a way of looking as expressed in the Eastern tradition of iconography. And Reverend William Briggs tells us about a place dedicated to the resolution of conflict and the fostering of greater understanding among people from every part of the globe.

We didn't plan it in this fashion, but this issue speaks to the reasons our lives changed on that September morn. Our hope is that, even in small ways, it makes a difference. □



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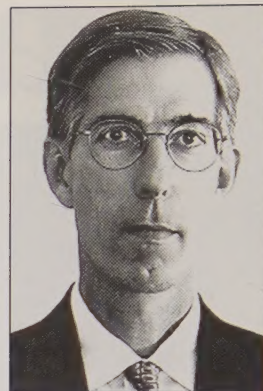
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# FACING MECCA FROM DALLAS

By Joe M. McCall, FAIA



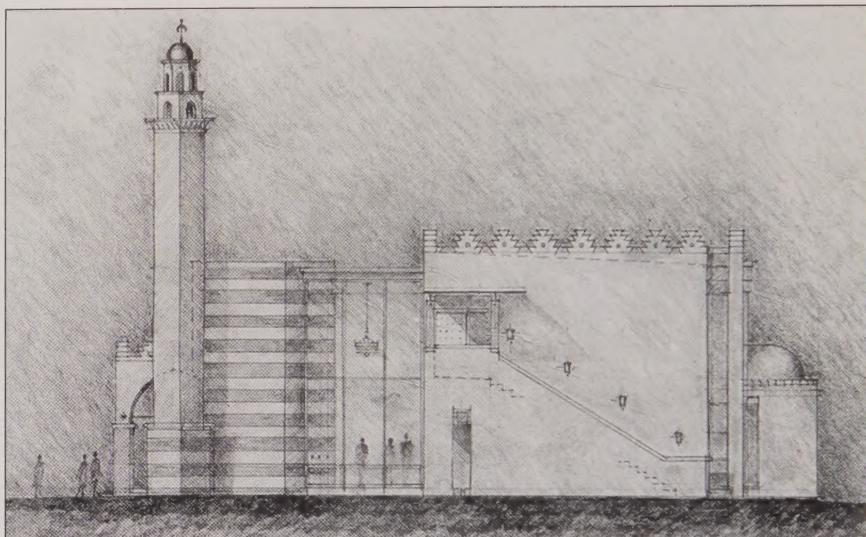
It seems so odd. An Anglo-Saxon Protestant Texas architect designs a mosque (*masjid*) for an Indian-based Muslim community in a residential neighborhood of Irving, Texas, a suburb of Dallas/Fort Worth. Some uncertain mix of fate, circumstances, and Allah's will combined with architectural firm credentials and design skills led to such a seemingly incongruous assemblage of players. This narrative speaks to the interactions, translations, and architectural interpretations interwoven to shape the resulting mosque for this transposed community, bonded by their unique religion and culture.

Within the United States reside over six million Muslims, and among major religions theirs is reported to be the fastest growing. Anjuman-e-Najmi Dallas, Inc. is the corporate name for the Dawoodi Bohra Jamaat community of the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex area. It represents a Shiite Fatimid (descendants of Mohammed's daughter, Fatima, and son-in-law, Ali) denomination of Islam that relocated in the area from India. The community's roots trace to the Fatimid period, 969 C.E. to 1140 C.E., a dynasty that ruled over Egypt and North Africa. Their worldwide head, known as *Dai-ul-Mutlaq*, is His Holiness, Dr. Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin.

## Architect selection and contract

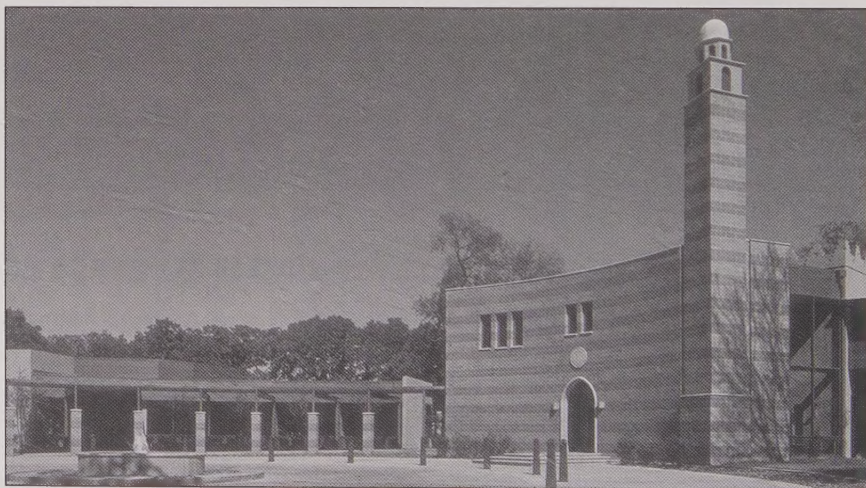
Some projects do seemingly "fall from the sky" into your firm's lap, while others are excruciatingly sought after, only to often fall just short of realization for a myriad of reasons. Traditional building committees sometimes overlook our firm in favor of larger specialty firms with vast lists of related project "types," whether a

JOE M. McCALL is a principal with Oglesby • Greene Architects in Dallas.



Joe M. McCall, FAIA

Dawoodi Bohra Mosque, Irving, Texas, conceptual drawing and finished mosque, below.



Charles Davis Smith

bank or a Baptist church. A middle ground selection is so often made on the basis of familiarity and predictability of product or brand versus qualitative, design-based abilities and results. This project in part did "fall from the heavens," bypassing any committee selection process. A community leader, who con-

tinues a family legacy of building and restoring mosques, learned of our firm through a mutual friend. Following introductions, we met and reviewed the proposed project. He arrived accompanied with an illustration of their desired layout drawn in plan view on blue graph paper with faint pencil lines laid along a



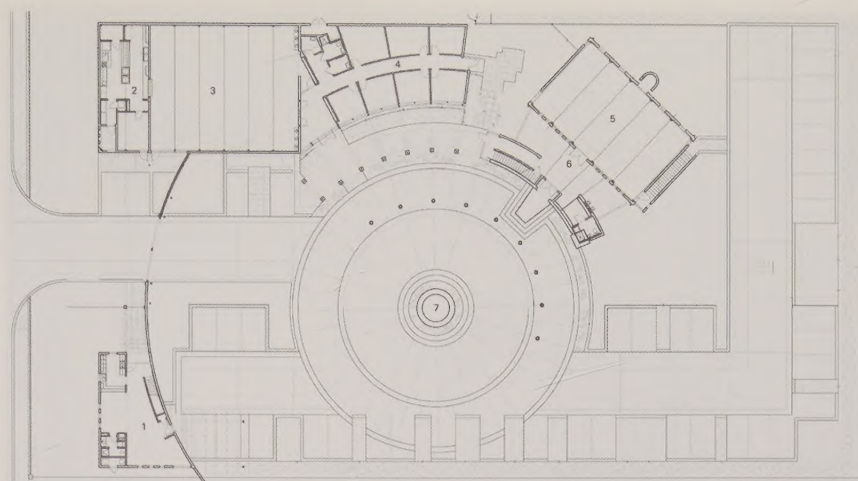
somewhat straight edge. It served as a referential tool for narration of the intended programmatic precepts and basic site constraints. At the end of the second meeting, project budget and size were generally set and after intense yet informal negotiation, we agreed on a fee and shook hands. That was the contract—a handshake. Little did we imagine at the time the bond and resulting friendship that would ensue from this symbolic gesture. Our firm's conventional business practices compelled us to press for a formal contract. Our ignorance and naiveté of the Muslim religion quickly exposed itself. Fortunately for us, the client, a successful international businessman, was experienced and graceful in dealings with Westerners not of his religion and native culture.

The standard American Institute of Architects (AIA) Agreement, which we completed and forwarded for review and signature, contains interest clauses for unpaid invoice balances after designated time periods. He bluntly marked through this section in its entirety as we learned that their religion does not allow interest payment or income. Not having any previous working relationship or even knowledge of the client, my partner and I conferred and made an executive decision to move forward and extend "good faith" without such provisions. Throughout the project, the client proved worthy of such good faith. As the project concluded, a significant "bonus" payment was made to us beyond the contractual fee as an act of gratitude. That was a "first" as well.

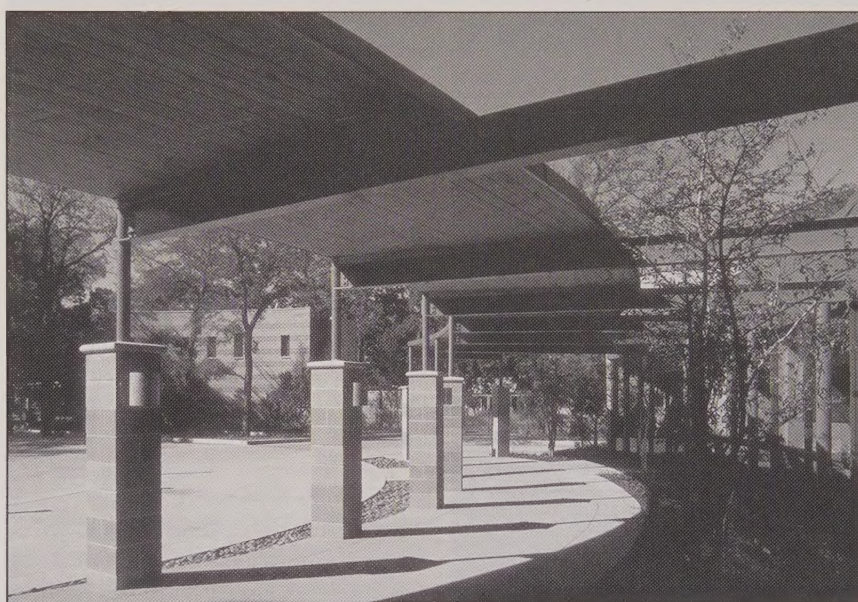
The assembled consultant team became another melting pot. The structural engineer, a close family friend of the client, became a wonderful asset. Not only was his engineering excellent, but he also became an invaluable interpreter and arbiter in another context, as he had been raised as a Dawoodi Bohra Muslim. We selected the mechanical/electrical engineer who often worked successfully with us, and happened to be a Jew.

### Program and site

The program consisted of four distinct components to compose the proposed mosque for approximately 200 members: a prayer hall (*bait-us-salat*), a school (*madrasa*) for religious studies, a dining/ community hall (*jamat khana*), and the priest's residence (*darul-imarat*). The new 1.34-acre (171-foot wide by 305 feet deep) building site is heavily wooded and rela-



Ground level site/floor plan.



Covered walk linking Prayer Hall to madrasa (school) and jamat khana (dining/community hall).

Charles Davis Smith

tively flat, located within a single-family residentially zoned neighborhood flanked by modest residences and two fundamentalist Protestant facilities on its adjacent edges. The local municipality would require a large storm water drain and inlet system serving the larger regional area to run within this site.

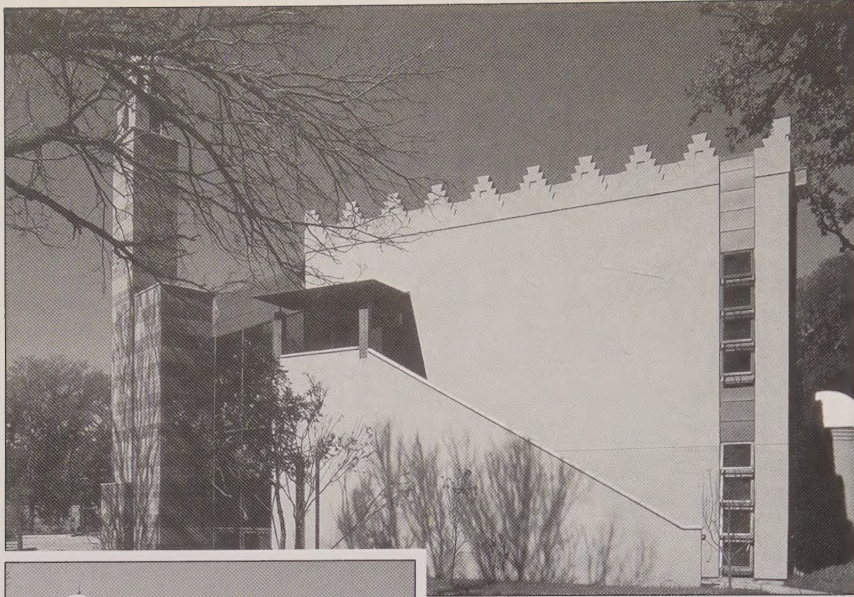
Historically, mosques were geographically located as a response to community-based attendance. Today it is the same, except the religion and community are not concentrated in the U.S. as in Muslim dominant countries. Dawoodi Bohra community members reside over a huge area of cities and suburbs. The site's inaccessibility to public transit systems dictated the need for in excess of 50 parking spaces within the site boundaries. While the client requested a tradi-

tional minaret, it is transformed into a symbolic marker for worship, much like a contemporary steeple. The traditional act of *adhan*, or call to prayer, five times a day from atop the minaret, would fall to deaf if not unreceptive ears within this eclectic neighborhood.

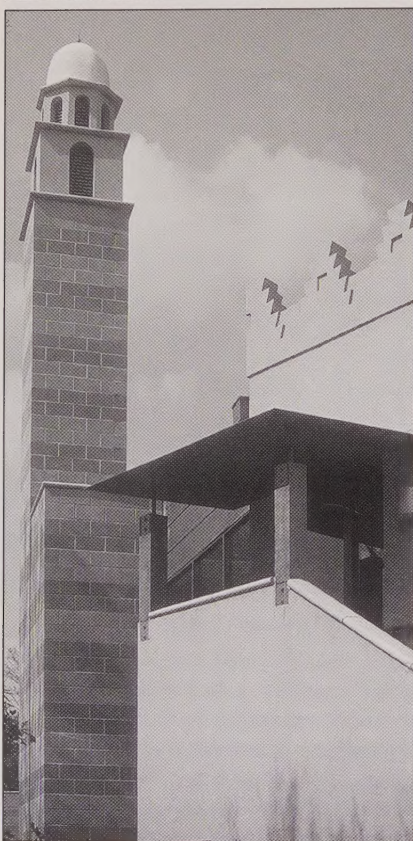
### Design criteria and influences

As non-Muslims with no experience in such projects, we anxiously sought a primer, a code or rulebook delineating liturgical and cultural do's and don'ts. We never found such a document and relied upon our own research and an extremely patient and didactic client. An unorthodox programming and schematic design process involved significant trial and error on our part combined with additional layerings of liturgical requirements





Above, side view of prayer hall showing minaret on left, and mihrab on right. Left photo, close-up of minaret, minaret cap and covering on prayer hall parapet.



Photos: Charles Davis Smith

emerging in reaction from client review.

Rooted in the Fatimid period, the Dawoodi Bohras called for certain traditional elements of this era to be transposed within the new facility. Particular reference was made to the finely detailed Al-Hakim and Al-Azhar mosques in Cairo, Egypt. The empowering distinction is the selective recall of symbols and forms to be interwoven into the project versus demand or expectations for a traditional mosque design. Architectural elements included such items as keel

arches with their precise formula for construction; geometric patterned crestings adorning the perimeter walls, parapets, and copings; specific form/composition of minarets and *mihrabs* (prayer niche centered on *qibla* wall); and unique patterning in mosaics, stone, and wood carvings.

The paramount design criterion was the *qibla*, or direction of prayer toward Mecca. From Irving, Texas it calculated to be N43.5E. Considerable clarification and confirmation was requested, including true versus magnetic North, as accuracy of prayers being aimed and received, in effect, were of critical importance. Another requirement was that the floor of the prayer hall be directly on the ground, void of any air space beneath it. Also no construction was to be above the *mihrab*, or niche, axial about the *qibla* wall. The prayer hall's plan dimensions were set as a width of 52 feet (52nd Dai-ul-Mutlaq) by 32 feet in depth (reference to the 32nd Dai, who had an important role). The minaret height also was determined to be 52 feet. Groups and bays of five were desired.

The project's diverse, 14,000-foot program and modest initial building budget (\$105 per square foot) prescribed that both utilitarian material palettes and conventional building systems be cleverly utilized and interwoven into this small, tree-laden site.

## Translating spatial and symbolic needs

While never specifically delineated in any programmatic requirements, it became clear that the mosque design must be, above all, an anchor for the identity of the community. It bonds its users in many ways, through both secular and spiritual needs. Their multicultural day-to-day lives dilute the congregants' culture, which the mosque distills and refocuses.

Budget constraints demanded that "richness" be reinterpreted into the detail, form, and collective composition, versus its traditional materiality. The exception was the selective use of glass mosaics tiled in Fatimid patterns at the prayer hall's entry surround, step risers, and minaret reveals. Further importance was given to the prayer hall by layering traditional Fatimid elements only on the prayer hall itself, and thereby stratifying its significance. A tension between traditional and modern idiom was established to honor authenticity and clarity to each.

The priest's residence (*darul-imitat*) fronts the neighborhood, as does the office and receiving to the public street. Otherwise, the mosque orients inwardly, privately to itself. The traditional reinterpretation of central court (*sahn*) is applied as public collection space and physical and spiritual linkage of all four building elements. A fountain centers in the circular space, symbolic of ablution prior to entering the prayer hall (as in the Al-Hakim mosque in Cairo). Its entry lies on axis from the fountain's center toward Mecca. Each of the four buildings is constructed of conventional wood framing with stucco cladding. Where the building edges touch the circular court, their walls become common load-bearing concrete masonry units, subtly banded and curved to define the space. The dining hall (*jamat khana*) is developed on a 9-foot module (54 by 45 feet) allowing for groups of eight to nine to sit on the floor around a 36-inch-diameter serving platter. Hand washing stations are prominently integrated within the space. It serves as an annex for special occasions where the prayer hall's capacity is exceeded. Placed between these two primary uses are the seven classrooms (*madrassa*) for liturgical studies, utilized primarily on weekends.

The prayer hall (2,600 square feet, excluding the forecourt area) accommodates approximately 200 worshipers. The women occupy the peripheral mezzanine area above, while the men align their

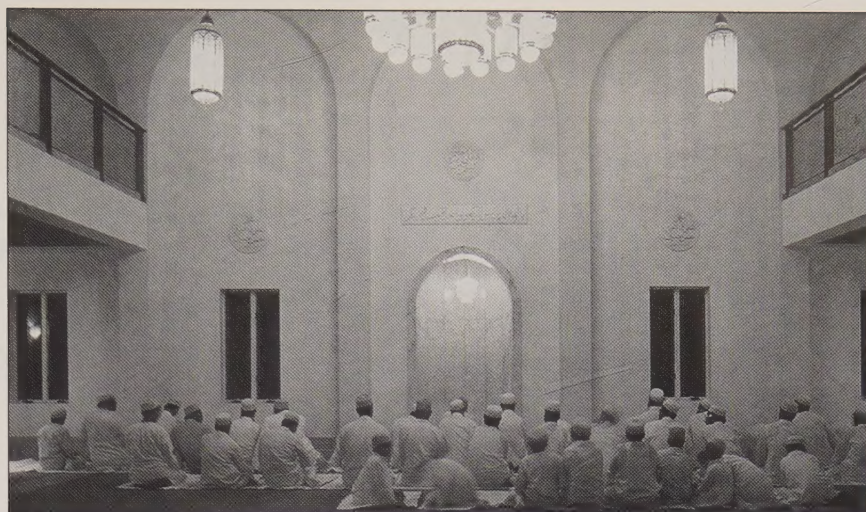


prayer rugs along the ground floor towards the *qibla*. The *mihrab* centers on the *qibla* wall's five bays bearing a Koranic scripture carved and gold leafed overhead, and translates, "In the name of Allah, the most gracious, the most merciful." Flanking the *mihrab*, two round carved gold-leafed medallions bear the names of Mohammed and his family members (Ali, Fatima, Hasan, and Husein). Upon entry to the forecourt, shelving for shoe storage fills each side along the curving masonry walls with toilets at ends.

Muslim liturgy and culture created occasional dilemmas for consultants and code authorities as well. Development codes based parking requirements on a space per linear foot of "pews" for religious facilities. In the absence of pews, we submitted a "prayer rug plan" to determine an official occupancy count, which also affected exiting and plumbing fixture requirements.

### Iftetah

In July of 1998, a celebration (*Iftetah*) followed the building's completion. The community (*mumineen*) of Dallas offered to their worldwide holy leader (*Aqa Maula*), His Holiness, Dr. Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin, the facility to be pledged as a *masjid*. He accepted and ceremoniously "unlocked" its doors. The significance of this event to community members is overwhelming. Given a local membership of approximately 200, some 2,000 followers worldwide arrived for this special day. To be in the presence of their *Aqa Maula* is a cherished lifetime goal and event. The head of the construction company and I were the only non-Muslims invited to attend limited portions of the event. The prayer hall filled early and exceeded its interior capacity fivefold with as many again viewing by video in the *jamat khana* annex and others pressing to view through the windows. Everyone was adorned in their traditional Dawoodi Bohra dress; the men and boys in their *sayas*, *kurtas*, and caps (turbans by the Sheikhs), and the women and girls in their embroidered *ridas*. His Holiness and entourage had arrived earlier from Bombay and were transported within the mosque grounds by horse-drawn carriage to the steps of the *masjid*. I was positioned in the forecourt directly adjacent to the pair of doors to the prayer hall to be



Charles Davis Smith

Prayer hall looking to *qibla* wall.

"unlocked." The air conditioning was stressed far beyond its design as the midday temperature rose to 105°F.

As His Holiness approached the entry, followers' chants grew more intense as the crowd, both inside and outside, lunged forward to participate in this great moment. If the building structure (the mezzanine, in particular) were ever to fail, this would be the ultimate test. Despite my lack of affiliation, I truly felt the intensity and significance of the occasion. His Holiness possessed an unforgettable aura about him. I was later presented before him, and a beautiful shawl was placed around me. He spoke in a language that I did not understand, but upon raising my head and making eye contact, he clearly said in English, "this is a most beautiful building." I wondered if he had in some way blessed me, and felt as if he had.

The celebration continued long after I departed. As I arrived at my car in a remote parking area I looked down to

realize that I had forgotten my shoes.

### Reflections

Afterward, our insecurities of its suitability for worship in accordance to the liturgy of Islam were relieved. The design spoke to those who use it, providing both an uplifting and spiritual experience. It was anointed as a holy place and anchor for its community. This mosque, while collectively unifying, in other respects reveals itself in an odd contrast of traditional and modern idioms, secular and spiritual aspects, richness and frugality.

Beyond the satisfaction of realizing a successful building project, one of the true gifts is that of friendships between architect and client. Even though his mission here is complete, this individual will always remain a friend. His wisdom, his sense of business, and above all his faith are extraordinary. He respected the architecture. He steadfastly defended it while deflecting any congregational ire.

During the course of construction, my mother died. Several Dawoodi Bohra Jamaat representatives attended her memorial service and had "prayed for her soul" the previous night. The more I observed and discussed their religion with our client, the more similar than different it seems from mine.

The mosque was featured as part of a religious facility tour at the 1999 National AIA Convention in Dallas. The *mumineen* leaders took great pride in hosting such an event. As they greeted the group, placed on an easel in the forecourt of the prayer hall was a sign that read, "Architects, you make America beautiful." □



Joe M. McCall, FAIA

*Iftetah ceremony (His Holiness unlocking doors to masjid).*



# THE FORM, MEANING, AND VERSATILITY OF ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE

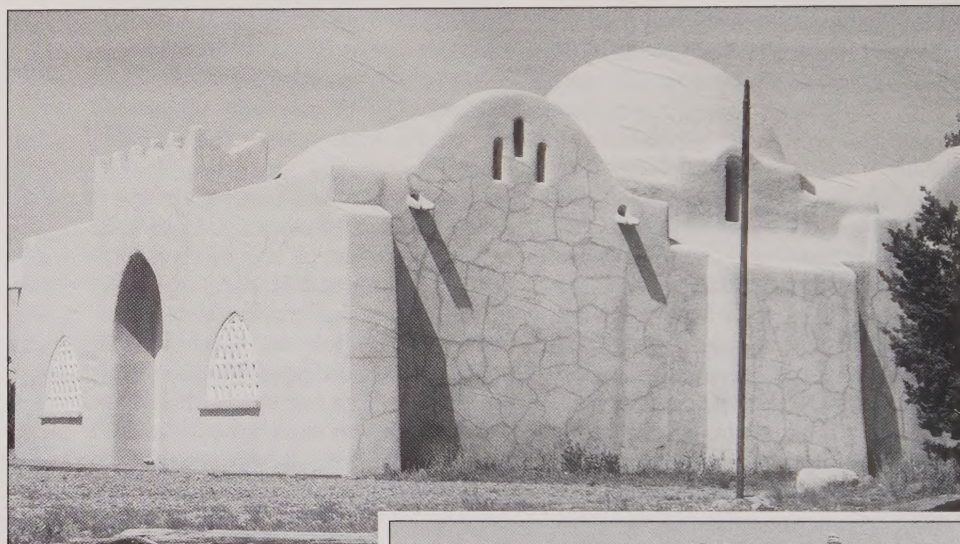


## Hassan Fathy's Dar al-Islam Mosque Complex in Abiqui, New Mexico

By Christiane J. Gruber

When one thinks of Islamic architecture, one's mind may visualize sunlit mudbrick structures in countries such as Syria, Egypt, and Morocco. These Middle Eastern countries are located in approximately the same latitude as the state of New Mexico, where one of the most aesthetic, evocative masterpieces of Islamic architecture rejoices in the presence of the Islamic faith in the United States, simultaneously enters into a harmonious dialogue with nature and other architectural endeavors scattered throughout New Mexico. The Dar al-Islam (House of Islam) Mosque Complex is located on a large plateau overlooking the Chama River Valley. It rises in melodious concert with the neighboring white limestone formations of Piazza Blanca and partakes in the enduring adobe building traditions of both the native Pueblos and later Christian colonialists.

Swiss-born CHRISTIANE JACQUELINE GRUBER, a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Princeton University, is a Ph.D. candidate in Islamic Art History at the University of Pennsylvania. The recipient of a fellowship by the American Institute for Iranian Studies (Washington D.C.), she is currently studying Persian and conducting archival research in Tehran, Iran. She wishes to thank Hakim Archuleta, Director of Community Relations at Dar al-Islam, for his generosity and kindness, and Eric Knoll, whose photographs appear in this article.



Dar al-Islam Mosque entrance (above) and Piazza Blanca (right), white stone formations north of mosque complex in Abiqui New Mexico. Architect: Hassan Fathy

Designed by the Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy in 1980, the project initially included a mosque, a school (*madrasa*), dormitories (*riwaq*), housing for approximately 100-150 families, a women's center, a public bath (*hammam*), a hotel and even a crafts' center. But due, in part, to Fathy's death in 1989 and growing costs, only the Mosque complex (the mosque, school, and dormitories) was completed. One cannot, however, consider it incomplete because it speaks to the history of Islam as expressed through the adaptability of its form and, most importantly, the prin-

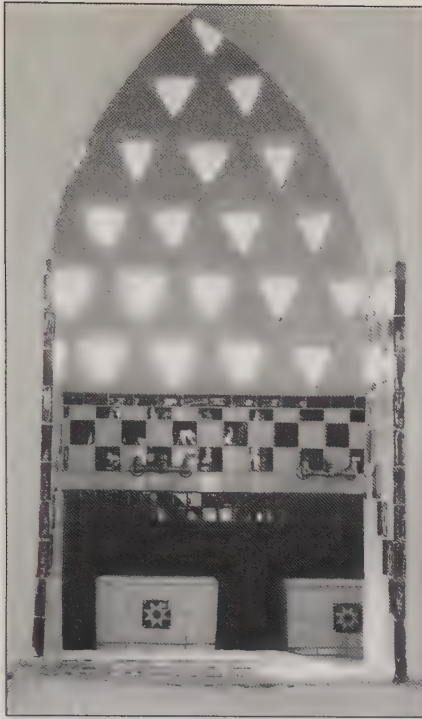


ciples of a monotheistic faith, encoding within its walls spaces in which belief systems and social structures are continuously energized and reactivated.

The mosque, as an established structural entity found its origins on the Arabian peninsula during the 7th century, when Muhammad's house in Medina (later transformed into a mosque) served

Photos: Eric Knoll





Ablutions room: tiles on wall are white, blue, and green stars; tiles on floor are brown octagons and blue stars.

as a gathering place and the locus for social communion and dialogue. Ever since, the mosque has served at both functional and symbolic levels, using a variety of building materials, inner and outer decorations, and geographical locations. The propelling forces behind the construction of a mosque are to provide a clearly defined space for the community to worship, congregate, read, study, recite, thus reifying the Qur'an, the Holy Book of Islam. Although one may argue that a mosque can be simply defined as a space or court demarcated for prayer (*musallah*) in the direction of Mecca, it can hardly be denied that over time, certain fixed architectural components have become associated with, if not inseparable from mosque architecture.

### Worship

The first, and perhaps most vital, concept is that worship (*sallah*) is an action that takes place in the mosque area itself, after performing the ritual ablutions in a room specifically for that purpose. A Muslim, or literally "he who submits to the will of God," prostrates toward a niche (*mihrab*) in the wall directed towards Mecca. The action of prostration (*sajada*), or symbolic physical submission, has given its name to the most common term for mosque in Arabic: *masjid*, or the place for prostration. The mosque, there-



Main prayer area: view of mihrab (niche toward Mecca), minbar (stepped pulpit), panel with "Allah" above mihrab with three hanging mosque lamps above, and carpet on floor.

fore, articulates space in both its functional and metaphorical surfaces. Within this area, the *mihrab* (niche) has only a visual purpose; it is not used to house a statue, relic, or liturgical object. It is a nodal point for prayer, a doorway (*bab*) to paradise and a gate towards Mecca.

Above the *mihrab* is a small calligraphic panel inscribed with the word *Allah* or God. In shape and decoration, it harmonizes with the monochromatic concrete reinforced adobe walls of the building. Calligraphy, like geometric and vegetal decoration, has always been associated with Islamic cultures. Although the depiction of humans and animals is not strictly prohibited in the Qur'an, there are injunctions against such depictions, a practice deemed to usurp God's power of creation. This argument aside, revelation and faith in Islamic faith are to be found in the word and act of recitation. According to a *hadith* (saying of a prophet) it is believed that the first thing that God created was pen and ink to record all events until the end of time and space. It is also said in the Qur'an that God is he "who teaches by the pen, teaches mankind that which he knew not." Plainly, writing a letter or word, according to the famous philosopher al-Ghazzali (died 1111), gives clarity to the truth. The calligraphic rendition of the name of God above the *mihrab* in the Dar al-Islam Mosque is a clear and beautiful

manifestation of divine presence and guardianship.

God is embodied too in the lamps hanging from the dome, located immediately above the *mihrab*. These glass lamps, arranged on a large circular ring, echo the Qur'anic verse "We have adorned the lowest heaven with lamps," and hence equate the dome of the mosque with the dome of heaven. Even more consequential is the metaphor of God as light, made omnipresent through lamps or natural sunlight filtered through clear or stained glass.

One of the most famous verses from the Qur'an, often inserted as calligraphic decoration or at least symbolically latent throughout the Islamic world, is the so-called Verse of Light (*Ayat al-nur*):

God is the light of the heaven and earth. The semblance of His light is that of a niche in which is a lamp, the flame within a glass, the glass a glittering star, as it were, lit with the oil of a blessed tree, the olive, neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil appears to light up even though fire touches it not—light upon light.

The architectural and symbolic inspirations for the Dar al-Islam Mosque can be found in both the Upper Nile and the American Southwest. The lamps illuminate the *mihrab* and encircle what can be interpreted as microcosmos.

Photos: Eric Knoll



To the right of the *mihrab* is a three-stepped wooden chair called a *minbar*. There is no equivalent term in English, although the word "pulpit" has been used to describe its location at the front of the congregation, developed from the very beginning of Islam as a piece of wooden mosque furniture which was laden with political meaning and religious legitimization. In the early years the Caliph, or ruler of the Islamic lands, was also an Imam, or prayer leader. On Fridays, he would preach from the *minbar*, and his sermons were political and religious in nature. In some mosques, the *minbar* was built on wheels and rails and was pushed back into a small recessed chamber during the rest of the week. However, over the centuries, this piece of furniture became larger, sometimes reaching eleven steps, and more and more elaborate, including intricately inlaid mother-of-pearl or ivory geometric designs in the carved wooden side panels. The *minbar's* presence in mosque furnishings, whether it was used regularly or not, became permanent and forever an



Classroom with blackboards (on right) with Arabic writing.

is almost tantamount to the practice of prayer in the adjacent mosque.

The ceiling of the classroom is covered in diagonal wooden beams, with an opening for natural sunlight. This "wood," or rustic motif, found in the *minbar* reverberates in the window as well. Although the lattice-work in the window is made of adobe and not wood, the pattern itself is inspired by wooden window designs called *mashrabiyya*, which are typical of Islamic domestic architecture. This motif, as artistic as it may appear, is also functional: it allows for the penetration of light, while simultaneously preventing excessive heat and infiltration of dust and sand, characteristic of both New Mexico and the arid Islamic lands. The geometric patterns of the window and ceiling are attune to the row of tiles running below the window and the blackboards. These green, white, and blue tiles are decorated with eight-pointed stars, a symbol often interpreted as the glorification of mathematical clarity and as the seal of Solomon, himself depicted as the symbol of kingship and rightful sovereignty in the Qur'an. These patterns have psychosomatic effects on the observer and create pleasure in the eye and mind of the beholder. And if pleasure is cognition, then what better decoration in a room dedicated to learning?

Because of the scope of this essay, other components of the Dar al-Islam Mosque Complex cannot be fully examined. However, it is important to note that, mosque and the *madrasa*, the dorm rooms, five courtyards, classrooms, a library, a media-room, and a cafeteria all play integrating roles in the functioning and objectives of the Foundation. Indeed, among the programs offered by the Dar al-Islam Mosque Complex is a two-week residential and educational program for secondary school teachers who wish to learn about Islamic faith and civilization, in order to incorporate it into their own academic curricula. Hassan Fathy, the mind and architect behind the Dar al-Islam project, understood how learning and conviction can be achieved through such a built environment. He notes: "Inspiration is knowledge coming directly from inner feelings without study or analysis. Most art is inspired, coming from what psychology calls the subconscious." (1967) The Dar al-Islam Mosque complex was envisioned and constructed with these inspired principles, and it continues to flourish with today's unbroke

indelible link between politics and religion in its congregational setting. In the case of Dar al-Islam Mosque, the *minbar* serves as a link to this politico-religious past, despite its understated size and unpretentious decoration.

#### Education

Historically, the mosque has not just been the locus for religious exaltation or political activism, but has also served as the centerpiece for an entire complex of buildings, which serve the public in one way or another and indoctrinate it into the various sciences particular to the Islamic faith. For this reason, one will often find a religious school, either adjoining a mosque or in close proximity.

Such a school is called a *madrasa*, "the place of study." At the Dar al-Islam Mosque in Abiquiu, it is located immediately behind the congregational space.

It is a small room, whose tones and interior light give it a very unique sense of warmth, equanimity, and tranquility—an irresistible space for study and contemplation. There are two blackboards located on the right. When I visited the mosque a year ago, the blackboards were covered in Arabic calligraphy. Two exercises in writing were clearly legible: the first was the *Bismillah*—"In the Name of God, the most Merciful, the most Beneficent" and the second was the *Kalima*—"There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his Messenger." This practice of reading and writing

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# AN EASTERN VIEW: ICONS AND THEIR MEANING

By Joseph M. Malham



As we enter the third millennium of Christianity there seem to be more voices raised from the occidental and the oriental stems of that faith, seeking to discover that which binds rather than what divides. Dogmatic discussions and theological hairsplitting are essential to a healthy dialogue, but the practical benefit of these debates rarely trickle down to the layperson seeking the face of God in the course of their ordinary day.

Orthodoxy is an ancient fount of wisdom and tradition from which Westerners can draw much that is needed to deepen a love of God's mystery. In the past few decades we have rediscovered and reclaimed much of our spiritual heritage from the East and what would have been the exception even thirty years ago is, fortunately, becoming the norm among clergy as well as laity.

With their scripture-centered writings and pragmatic Christocentricity, Eastern Fathers such as Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom are being read by more and more Western Christians—Protestant as well as Catholic—who see in them a living link to the life of the early Church.

If one follows the line of Orthodoxy's longitude he is bound to sooner or later run into that which truly is one of the East's greatest gifts to spirituality and to history. It is this gift which not only rep-



*Mary, Seat of Wisdom, a fine example of iconography.*

resents the glories of Orthodoxy, but represents a visual bridge upon which the East and West can meet in a common journey through the mystery of God: the icon.

While many people are rediscovering the glory of icons and the beauty of praying with them, for the most part they still seem to remain relegated to the esoteric domain of either Orthodox Christians or of "sophisticated" Western Christians. This is a shame since icons, like most

spiritual truths, are paradigms of simplicity complicated by half-hearted attempts to understand them.

The Orthodox Christian has an intuitive grasp of the mystery that lies hidden in the marrow of the icon, and it is a mystery that many Westerners could also grasp if they simply and prayerfully committed to its profundity. The icon is a mystery because it invites the viewer into depths and revelations that transcend the ethnic and even artistic boundaries that can rupture the unity of the worship that belongs to God alone. Icons are more suited to liturgy of all denominations than most of the art used in contemporary sacred space, which tend to be derivatives of outdated historical prototypes that do not speak to an eternally present longing in our lives for the divine.

The faux Renaissance, Baroque, and Romantic imagery that has been the staple of church interiors since the 19th century is primarily decorative by nature and rarely connects at any point with the liturgical life of the community.

Statues, which can be works of great beauty that add a tremendous amount of power to a space, tend to be less adapted to the liturgy than icons. Aside from processions and shrines, statues rarely are the foci of liturgical celebration and to the Orthodox represent *verboten* forms of worship strictly prohibited by the First Commandment. On an aesthetic level, church statuary tends toward "cookie-cutter kitsch" since the commissioning of serious works by competent

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sculptors can be cost-prohibitive.

How then, do icons bind the East and West together and how can we fully understand their relevance to the liturgical life of the community?

Both the words "icon" and "liturgy" are derived from Greek words and have broad, general meanings that translate into something very unique in the Christian sense. The word "icon" simply means image, but has come to represent a particular form of spiritual work of art that reflects truths about faith in line and color.

"Liturgy" originally meant a work publicly performed by or for the people. In the Christian sense, liturgy means the participation of the people of God in the work of God. Liturgy is not only a celebration of the people but also a proclamation of the redemption of all humanity through the passion and death of Jesus Christ. In a strictly celebratory sense, liturgy is an encounter, a participatory and inclusive celebration that is not only sanctified but also vivified through the energy of all present. The less that people are present and aware during liturgy, the further from the holy it drifts. Without the prayerful participation of all present, liturgy is reduced to a social gathering no different than a political rally or academic lecture.

As people were not made for the Sabbath but the Sabbath for people, so it is with liturgy. The liturgy is made for the people of God but it is a responsibility, indeed a privilege, to render it holy through conscious engagement of the mysteries within.

So it is with the icon. Of all the forms of art put to sacred use throughout the centuries, the icon is the only form of art that has not changed with the vagaries of time and taste. While the style and certain iconographic elements change from country to country and region to region, the basic elements that make the icon the "image of the invisible" remain securely and perpetually in place.

Icons have been a visual language of faith since the dawn of Christianity two millennia ago. From the catacombs on,

Christians have sought to venerate the sacred events and persons of their religion in line, color, and form. While some early bishops saw iconography as the worship of graven images, many more eminent theologians and Church Fathers, including John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil the Great, saw the icon as veneration rather than worship and encouraged their public and private use.

In the 8th century, an unconvinced Byzantine Emperor Leo III enforced icon-

the right to venerate the image of the Word.

Icons are pedagogic, icons reveal, icons draw in, but despite their somewhat tumultuous history, icons are ultimately silent. This noiselessness, so contrary to our human nature, reflects that place where "deep calls upon deep" (Ps 42:7), in which God speaks to us in a wordless language of pure love. Icons do not pretend to be realistic portrayals of persons and events; indeed, the somewhat surreal, stylized nature of the icon merely confirms the otherworldly glory to which the people and events portrayed point to and where they now dwell.

Icons are "written" on wood panels for reasons that are practical as well as spiritual. Wood is not only a stable and easily accessed material, but it is the substance of which the cross—the great instrument of redemption—was made. The gold used for haloes and backgrounds represents the divine light of God that illuminates the depths of those who have received the grace of His light. The eyes, which are considered the windows of the soul, are wide to receive and communicate the glories of the Incarnation, while the mouth is small and decidedly non-sensual; a tribute again to silence and reverence.

Flesh tones, if one looks closely at an icon, are layers of increasingly lighter tones built up over a solid layer of dark. This gradual bringing forth of light from dark not only mirrors our redemptive journey in Christ but conveys something of the radiance experienced by those who live in the Light of the Word. Not only do faces shimmer with effervescent light, but clothes, rocks and trees as well. All matter is transcended by the grace of the Light who is the Being One, and nothing looks like anything we have ever seen or hope to see except in Paradise.

The icon is transcendent in nature, and forever retains a dimension of the eternal while rooted in forever in the present. This transcendence stems primarily from the fact that icons are scripturally rooted (which is why an icon is "written" and not



*Old Testament Trinity by the 15th century artist Andrei Rublev.*

oclastic laws in an effort to stamp out what he believed was image-worship that offended Almighty God. Leo's destruction of icons gave him a chance to do some political house cleaning as well, since the smashing of the "idols" placated non-Christian segments of his empire whose support was desperately sought.

Following wrangling from both advocates as well as opponents of icons in succeeding emperors and empresses, the veneration of icons was unequivocally re-established by the Patriarch Methodius on the First Great Sunday of Lent on March 11, 843. Hundreds of persons, including bishops, monks, and laymen and women, had paid with their lives for



"painted") and always point to the Incarnation as revealed by the four evangelists. This is true of the Old Testament icons as well as the icons of the Church Fathers and saints of the Sub-Apostolic Age. Like spokes of a wheel, icons of those who came before as well as after Christ converge inward and are unified on the person of the God-Man.

Take for example the magnificent icon of the Trinity by the 15th century Russian master Andrei Rublev. Based on the scene in Genesis (Gen 18:1-15) when Abraham entertains the three mysterious visitors under the oak at Mamre, the icon continues in the Patristic tradition of interpreting the scene as an Old Testament manifestation of the Holy Trinity.

A complex masterpiece of geometric composition and dynamic use of light and color, the Rublev Trinity employs organic and perishable material to dimensionally define the indefinable. Downplaying the presence of Abraham and Sara, who have scrambled away to get food and drink for their three mysterious guests, Rublev opts to concentrate on the unity of the group. Symbolizing Father, Son, and Spirit, the three are bonded together in circular patterns that reinforce the strength of the bond. The dinner table becomes an altar, the flesh in the bowl is sanctified by the gesture of benediction of the center figure, and the gazes each fixes on the other tell us of the depth of their love.

Far from making the viewer a passive onlooker, the circular geometry pulls one deeper into the unfathomable depths of their love, and more than being an image of unity the Rublev icon shows the Trinity as the source of all unity.

As another example, take the 15th century icon of the Nativity of Christ in Moscow's Tretyakov Gallery. Like most icons, it is an interpretation of a prototypical image written by a master iconographer. Like the Rublev Trinity, the Nativity is a brilliant, complex composition of geometry and symbolism that draws the viewer into the center of its silent mystery.

Devoid of the superfluous sentimentality that chokes so many Western

images of the first Christmas, the icon of the Nativity uses the Lucan narrative to unequivocally proclaims the entrance of the divine into time and space. Circular rather than linear, the narrative of the icon begins with the appearance of the star at the top and begins a clockwise spiral to the head of the Christ child, which is the axis of the work.

Along the way of the spiral we are presented with images of the angels appearing to the frightened shepherds, wet

beginning.

Below the child, in majestic repose, the Blessed Virgin reclines on a couch absorbed in the profound realization that, truly, her Son is Emmanuel, "God with us." In one work we see search, fear, doubt, joy, light, dark, life, death, and a final resting in the knowledge that Jesus is Lord. In one work is reflected the journey of each and every one of us.

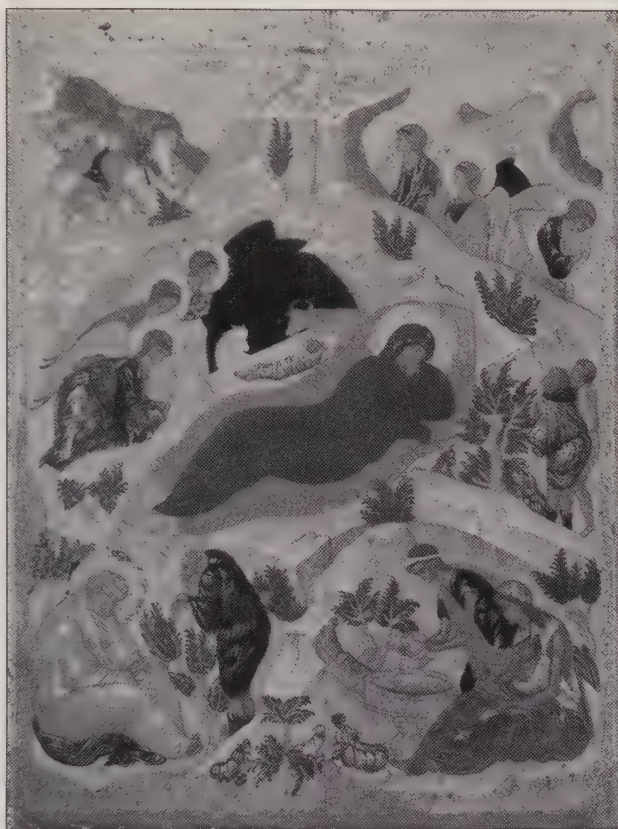
Icons are not only scriptural but spatial as well. Their narratives are purposely written within the confines of a given space, which is why one of the iconographic norms is for icons to have frames built up around the parameter of the panel. The frame contains the image, roots it in a given space, and draws attention to the truth within rather than to distractions without.

It is obvious that liturgy is spatial as well. The act of liturgy—regardless of denomination—calls for a gathering of people for a specifically sacred purpose. Even if just a few are present, this gathering constitutes an assembly and the place where they worship is rendered holy by their act. The introduction of the icon into liturgy is a natural, indeed a necessary, marriage that joins together two integral elements of the Christian witness.

The icon mirrors the liturgy in that it renders us in a state of total awareness of God's presence and everlasting mercy. As we participate in the present moment while in attendance at the liturgy, so do

we participate in the eternal present of God while engaging an icon in communal prayer. The lessons that we draw from the truths revealed in the icon in turn feeds our desire to witness to the Lord in communal acts of worship and in individual acts of love. This self-perpetuating cycle of witness and love takes us a step further to see the icon not as a mirror of liturgy, but as liturgy.

The icon is called a "window" into paradise, through which we privately or communally gaze while remaining firmly rooted in our temporal existence. Liturgy in the Christian and celebratory sense, constituting a break in our normal life routine that allows time for intimate and profound conversation with God,



*The Nativity from the 15th century proclaims the entrance of the divine.*

nurses bathing the newborn infant, Saint Joseph lost in pondering thought while the devil (disguised in humble peasant garb) attempts to shatter his belief in the divine drama unfolding above. The spiral terminates its route, following the arrival of the Magi, in the cave that holds the infant.

Emerging as a burst of light from the darkness of the cave (symbolizing the darkness of the pre-Incarnational world) the infant lies peacefully swaddled in the linen wrappings that nevertheless foreshadow his death and three days in the tomb. The cycle of Christ's life is completed in one work, his Alpha and Omega, his beginning and end, which will become for all humanity an eternal



likewise is a window through which we pass into a different level of awareness. Melding the icon with the liturgy is like going through a window within a window, a door within a door that leads us into a deeper sense of longing for God and love for one another. Without fostering this longing and this love, the icon and our engagement of it is meaningless.

There are many practical and marvelous ways into which the icon can be melded into the liturgy, ways that will draw people together in prayer while drawing them deeper into the mysteries of each. Frescoes or a soaring iconostasis (wall-like installation of several life-size icons) are magnificent but not necessary for non-Orthodox spaces. Having icons written exclusively for a community, icons that celebrate patron saints or sacred events from the liturgical cycle, is an ideal way of enriching private and communal prayer life.

Setting aside a quiet space within a space, in the sanctuary or a side altar, for an icon and a single vigil light can invite contemplative prayer, spiritual reading, or simply "resting in the Lord." Processing into the space carrying an icon of a saint or scriptural event can add

an immense profundity and beauty to the liturgy, and such icons rapidly become beloved treasures of the community.

While the history of icons and understanding their mysteries can be a lengthy learning process, one needs not be daunted when acquiring one for individual or communal prayer. While reproductions are magnificent for home or office, there is a dignity and a splendor in placing a hand-written icon in a sacred space that can be experienced and not described.


Finding an artist to write an icon is a double dignity towards which a community should aspire—a dignity that not only honors God with a work of beauty but also supports an artisan who has devoted their life to the sacred apostolate of liturgical art. An iconographer is not simply an artist, but an instrument who is graced with the ability to reveal God's human face and who deserves the respect and the support of the Christian community.

The aesthetic criterion for commissioning an icon can be extensive and complex but the spiritual criterion is somewhat simpler; namely, that the

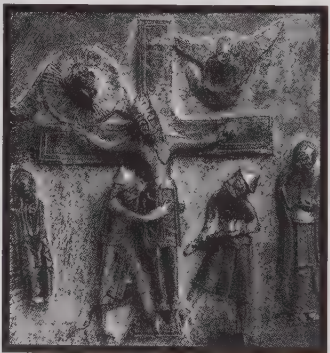
iconographer be a person of faith and prayer whose journey can be seen and felt in the icons they write.

In summation, their work, their very lives must echo the words of the great champion of icons, St. John of Damascus, and proclaim that "the image of God incarnate who appeared on earth in the flesh, who in his ineffable goodness, lived with men and assumed the nature, the volume, the form and the color of flesh."


Icons have traditionally been used through history in extraordinary ways beyond that of visual aids for piety and prayer. From Moscow to Rome and the vast spaces in between, Icons have been held aloft to ward off plagues, to offer thanksgiving, to seek intercession and to drive invading armies back into the sea. But as popes and patriarchs, as well as bishops, priests, and laity from both the Eastern and Western traditions of Christianity have discovered, there is much more that unites rather than divides us as people of God. Icons are a visual link between we the living and those who have gone before us, as the Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass declares, "marked with the sign of faith. □"





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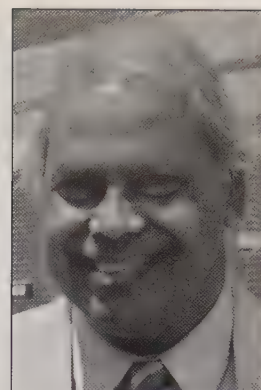
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# WITH AN INDIAN FLAVOR: PROVIDENCE VEDANTA CENTER

By Raj Saksena, FAIA



Stephan Brigid

The new Vedanta Center in Providence, Rhode Island is an expression of this Hindu faith. This article is organized in four parts: 1) What is Vedanta; 2) the Vedanta movement's origins in India; 3) the Vedanta movement's beginnings in the United States; and 4) the design and construction of the new Providence Vedanta Center. I have used as sources the following Vedanta publications: *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, *Vedanta Philosophy*, *Vivekananda and His Swamis*, *Dharma for All*, *Vedanta Societies of Boston and Providence*, and *Providence Vedanta Center*. With Swami Sarvagatananda's permission, I have reproduced "What is Vedanta?" from published Vedanta literature.

## What Is Vedanta?

Vedanta means spiritual wisdom. "Vid" means "to know." "Veda" means "knowledge" and "anta" means the "end and aim of knowledge"—the spiritual wisdom that comes out of Realization of Reality. Vedanta is not confined to any particular scripture; it includes all the spiritual teachings of the saints of all ages and places. It is a federation of faiths and a commonwealth of spiritual concepts.

Vedanta includes the following fundamental principles:

- Truth is one, sages call it variously. In other words, God is one; people worship Him in different forms.
- Man, in his essential nature, is divine.
- The goal of man is to realize this divinity.

RAJ SAKSENA, FAIA apprenticed with Paul Rudolph and worked at several Boston firms. He was founding Dean of a new School of Architecture at Roger Williams College (now Roger Williams University) in Bristol, Rhode Island, and has his own practice in Warren, Rhode Island.



Raj Saksena, FAIA

*Vedanta Center, Providence, Rhode Island. One-third of East facade (on left) is new, matching the original building exactly.*

• The ways to realize this divinity are innumerable. They are called the Yogas. As Sri Ramakrishna declared, "As many faiths, so many paths."

Vedanta is a way of living and realizing. It gives full freedom to each individual to evolve morally and spiritually according to his or her own faith and conviction.

Modern Vedanta is based on the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. It includes various truths found in all religions of the world, including the teachings of the world's great saints and sages. A Vedantin is one who accepts all religions as true paths to the same goal.







Restored front hall, above, and new chapel, right, at Vedanta Center.

### Sri Ramakrishna

Through the ages, India has produced many illumined sages who had direct experience of God. Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886) was one such illumined soul. He first realized God while practicing the discipline of Hinduism. In 1866 he began to practice the discipline of Islam and realized God. At that time he had started to teach Vedanta in Calcutta. Eight years later, in 1874, he began to practice Christianity and realized God. He became firmly convinced that all religions are true and represent a path to God. He became the first religious prophet in recorded history to teach the harmony of religions. India's population consists of about 70 percent Hindus, 15 percent Moslems, 8 percent Christians, and the rest Buddhists, Zorastrians, and Jews. Hinduism does not have a central governing authority. Prayer and worship are considered a private matter.

### Swami Vivekananda

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) was the foremost disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, who inspired him to follow religious practices and disciplines that would bring him to God realization. (The word "swami" means a Hindu monk; sometimes the letters "ji" are added after "swami" as a mark of respect.) After Sri Ramakrishna's passing away in 1886, Swami Vivekananda introduced Vedanta to the U.S. in 1893 when he attended the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, where he was widely acclaimed. He traveled extensively throughout the U.S.

and other parts of the world preaching Vedanta, the Universal Gospel.

### Vedanta movement in America

The first points of contact in the U.S. were made by the great Swami when he visited Boston and nearby places both before and after the Parliament of Religions. Due to his influence, Vedanta Centers were later established in many important American cities. There are over a dozen centers in major cities in this country, including Chicago, San Francisco, Boston, New York, and Seattle, and numerous centers in Europe including Switzerland, England, and France. As a matter of principle, Vedanta Centers do not seek conversion.

Swami Sarvagatananda came to the United States from Calcutta in 1954 and is now the spiritual leader of both Providence and Boston Centers, assisted by Swami Tyagananda who came to this country from Calcutta in 1997. Swami Sarvagatananda is one of the religious counselors at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. He gives counseling to students and conducts services on Friday afternoons in Eero Saarinen's MIT Chapel. He is also one of the members of the Harvard United Ministry.

The following is part of the invocation given by Swami Sarvagatananda at the MIT commencement on June 1, 1993 (the year President Clinton spoke at the commencement) which beautifully articulates the relationship between human knowledge and spirituality (translated from

Sanskrit) and principles of Vedanta:

"Let there be no neglect of Truth.  
Let there be no neglect of Virtue.  
Let there be no neglect of  
Propriety. Let there be no  
neglect of Prosperity.  
Let there be no neglect of Learning  
and Teaching.  
Whatever deeds are blameless,  
they are to be done, and not  
others.  
Whatever good practices there are  
among us, they are to be  
adopted, and not others."

"May He who is Father in Heaven  
of the Christians, Holy One of the  
Jews, Allah of the Muslims,  
Buddha of the Buddhists, Tao of  
the Chinese, Ahura Mazda of the  
Zorastrians, and Brahman of the  
Hindus, lead us from unreal to the  
Real, from darkness to Light, from  
death to Immortality. May the All-  
Loving Being manifest Himself  
unto us, and grant us abiding  
understanding and all-consuming  
divine love. Peace, peace, peace be  
unto all."

### Providence Vedanta Center

The Providence Vedanta Center was founded by Swami Akhilananda in 1928. Services were held in downtown until 1931, when the chapel was opened at 224 Angell Street, a converted residence from the late 1800s.

The building at 224 Angell is located in the middle of campus of the Wheeler School, a private elementary and secondary school. The school expressed an interest in acquiring 224 and offered to purchase any building on the block for sale and exchange it for 224. Finally in 1998, Wheeler was able to acquire a building at 229 Angell Street (diagonally across the street from 224), a turn-of-the-century house which had been converted into doctors' offices in the 1950s, and exchanged 229 for 224. The Vedanta Center was allowed to remain at 224 until the new center at 229 was complete.

Swami is advised on the Center's activities by an Executive Committee appointed by him; however, his decision in all matters dealing with the activities of the Center is final. Sunday service is simple. It consists of prayer and meditation, music, a 40-minute talk by Swami, and concludes with a benediction prayer. Sometimes there is a meal afterwards.



In Spring 1998, a series of meetings was held to make an assessment of the program requirements of the new Center. Having been an active member of the Center for 35 years, as well as a member of the Executive Committee, I had an intimate understanding of the Center's activities and needs. This facilitated the process of discussion and decision-making. We all agreed to the following program requirements:

- The chapel needed seating for 70 and should have a level floor with flexible seating (chairs) because on special days the chapel is also used as a dining room. The dais should have two chairs and a speaker podium. Care should be taken to insure that the chapel has very good acoustics for both music and speech. The chapel should be equipped with a balanced sound system. All services are recorded for use by members of the congregation. A small room should be provided behind the altar to accommodate sound and recording equipment as well as an area for arranging flowers for the altar. This area should have a sink and adequate storage space.

- A dining room with a seating capacity of 20 at the table, with accommodation for up to 10 additional chairs for special occasions. The dining room should provide sufficient storage space.

- A kitchen large enough to accommodate a six-burner stove, two refrigerators, and two dishwashers. Space should be provided to accommodate vacuum cleaning equipment. The stove should have a direct outdoor exhaust. Since all the cooking is done by volunteer help at the Center, the kitchen should be designed so that several people can work at the same time without being in each other's way. Doors should be located in such a way that the circulation between the kitchen and the chapel is short. This will facilitate serving rice pudding or meals in the chapel on special days.

- A back hall that will have hand-capped toilets for both sexes, adequate storage for coats and shoes for the congregation. The hall should be provided with a bench for taking off and putting on shoes and adequate umbrella storage.

- An intimate library/book room for books, literature for sale, and informal seating for six persons. All books need to be stored in bookcases with glass doors. A lockable desk should also be provided.

- A suite for Senior Swami consisting of a sitting/study, a bedroom and a bathroom. The room should include lockable

file drawers and storage.

- A sitting/bedroom for Junior Swami with a bathroom.

- Both swamis' rooms should include ample book storage and an enclosed TV and VCR. Saffron is the holy color for swamis, therefore, the swamis' accommodations should utilize the holy color for their furnishings and finishes to the best extent possible.

- The Center provides childcare during the Sunday services. The child-care room should include a table to seat eight, a rocking chair and storage for small toys, craft supplies, and books. This room should have its own bathroom with baby-changing table and should be away from the chapel so noise will not travel during services.

- A shrine that can seat 15 persons—friends and devotees of the Center. The shrine is used early in the morning, before dinner in the evening, and again late in the evening. It should be away from all noisy activities.

- An office that is used by the Secretary/Treasurer of the Center as well as Junior Swami. The office should be equipped with two computers, fax machine, telephone, and open and lockable storage. The room should have a table and four chairs so it can be used for small meetings. Traditionally, none of the rooms in the Center is locked; however, this room should be lockable.

- A bed/sitting room with a bathroom for a visiting swami.

- Three bedrooms with two bathrooms for friends and devotees.

- A plant room facing south for growing and repotting plants and equipped with a utility sink.

### Design challenges and solution

After the program requirements of the Center were agreed to, the scope of work involved in the renovation

of the building was outlined:

- In order to restore this turn-of-the-century (1898) historic building to its original condition, all the ugly partitions added by the previous owners should be removed. This will reveal the original organization of the building consisting of three structural bays: the living room bay, the dining room bay, and the stair/hall bay in the middle. Once the partitions are removed, it will be necessary to provide new flooring since it will not be possible to properly refinish the existing floors.

- To create a large space for the chapel, it will be necessary to remove the fireplace chimney between the first and second floors on the west side. It will also be necessary to structurally support the chimney on the upper floors by using fully concealed steel columns and beams.

- Both the first and second floors are separated by level changes (three steps). In order to provide a satisfactory arrangement of spaces, the steps on both floors should be eliminated. Each floor should

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be level and therefore easily divisible. This will require tearing down the building additions on the east and south sides and rebuilding them. Care should be taken to match the new windows (and their spacing) so the new additions will be seamless with the original building. Eave details on second and third floor roofs should match the existing.

- Fire protection in the building is non-existent. A fire protection system should be provided for the whole building as required by the code. Once a fire protection system is installed, the central open stair will serve as a required means of egress.

- A new fire stair should be added. This will count as the second means of egress required by the code.

- The existing building does not have access for the handicapped, which is a code requirement. The simplest way to meet this requirement is to build a gentle ramp from the parking area to the basement floor. From there a handicapped person can take the elevator to the first floor. A wheelchair will be provided in the basement.

- The building should be fully air-conditioned (except the basement). Care

should be taken to insure that the existing high ceilings on the first and second floors are maintained.

Construction started in July of 1999 and was completed in May of 2000. During the construction process, Will Ayton (Secretary/Treasurer of the Center) was appointed to take care of day-to-day financial and practical decision-making for the Center. He did an exceptional job in that role and I am deeply grateful for his contribution to the project. I am also very thankful for my wife Cindy's support throughout this work.

During construction, the following unanticipated problems were solved:

- The existing storm windows on the exterior were deemed incompatible with the historic character of the building. These were removed and the original windows were replaced with new ones made with insulating glass for energy efficiency. The original lines of the through-dividing muntins were maintained.

- We made a sample of sand-blasted siding and discovered there wasn't much left to paint! We had no choice except to replace the siding.

- My scope of work was increased to

include all interior design. I chose to use hardwood floors and Oriental rugs. I used Charles Webb's classic modern furniture in cherry throughout. The Oriental rugs, warm colors, and simple lines of the furniture together contribute to an atmosphere of stability and peacefulness.

Every one of the design challenges has been successfully carried out. I am most grateful to Swami Sarvagatananda Maharaj ("great teacher") for approving all my design recommendations. Swamiji has been my family's spiritual teacher for 37 years and has been a constant influence on our lives (he married us 35 years ago); now I can honestly say he has also been the "ideal client." He is immensely pleased with the completed project, as is the congregation. As an architect, I couldn't ask for more. □

#### Project Credits

Architect and interior designer:

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Associate: Joseph Giorgi, AIA

Structural Engineer: Kevin Harrop of

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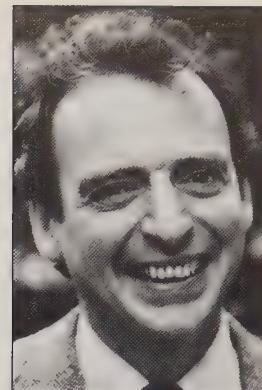
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# A PLACE WHERE THE WORLD MEETS

By Rev. William M. Briggs



*Editor's note: The Walker Center in Auburndale, Massachusetts, provides a place where people of different faiths and backgrounds meet on common ground. In this article, the Center's director explains its history, philosophy, and some of the programs that promote connections between East and West.*

Our communities are often isolated, but the Walker Center is a place where the world meets. The Walker Center is intentional about bringing diverse people together. While the news media reports daily violence stemming from racial, cultural, and economic differences, the Walker Center seeks ways to bring people of faith together and promote healing. We have folks from both mainland China and from Tibet who live at the Center. Instead of hostility, they seek common ground together while leading somewhat divergent activist, political lives. Today the Walker Center is home to global political and social exiles and movements for community transformation from around the world. We are also a bridge within North American culture as well. On a given day, one could see a Southern Baptist group and a Roman Catholic gay coalition at the Center on separate retreats, but who meet and eat together in our dining room.

During a recent conference to train educators in our nation's schools to promote anti-racism and multiculturalism, several of the teachers present shared the insight that at Walker the comfort level and environment led them to take more risks and go deeper into their feelings and experience which led to transformation and change. For them, the Walker Center became a very special

place for learning and growth. For more than 150 years this has been tradition at Walker.

## Historical beginnings

In 1868 Eliza Walker, her husband, and two children set sail on a Clipper Ship from Boston harbor, bound for Turkey. Soon hope and enthusiasm for their new mission turned into sadness and loss. Eliza's husband and one son succumbed to cholera. With a heavy heart she returned to her homestead in Newton, Massachusetts.

Endowed with a passion for service, Eliza saw the possibility of using her homestead in Auburndale as a boarding home for children of missionaries serving in dangerous and unhealthy places in the world. With the help of the American Missionary Society she secured funds and began welcoming boarders. We still see the children and grandchildren of these Missionaries return to share their stories, and sometimes even tales of romance and courtship as they spent the

years of growing up at the Walker Center. The Center was a safe haven and place of interchange, where new ideas and insights could develop and be exchanged.

Later, elder Missionaries, without pensions and a place to call home, returned to the Walker Center, the only place that offered consistency and the shared memories of family. The Walker Center reinvented itself with this phenomenon, and became the Walker Missionary Home. Former pastureland now became dotted with Victorian houses and gardens, and in 1910, a central building was constructed that housed a large dining room and living room. Missionaries returning from every corner of the world brought tales of adventure and a passion for mission.

Through the global network of contacts of the residents, the Walker Center began to house scholars and international clergy bound for Boston. Increasingly these visitors represented a global ecumenical spirit and a faith witness that was not confined to a single denomina-



Walker Center, main building.

REV. WILLIAM M. BRIGGS is the director of the Walker Center in Auburndale, Massachusetts.



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tional practice. By 1972 fewer missionaries were retiring in Boston because more had pensions or economic means to settle in warmer climates. Walker once again reinvented itself, and became the Walker Center for Ecumenical Exchange.

Today, the Walker Center is multigenerational, multicultural and multiracial, modeling many different cultural lifestyles, a place where people of Eastern and Western faith traditions come together. More than 12 countries are represented in our resident families. While we have remained predominantly Christian, members of our global family also include Muslims, Buddhists, and those of Jewish faith. Our resident community reflects global movements for transformation and change.

## Global linkages

Two examples serve to illustrate Walker's role in forging East/West linkages. When students faced armed resistance in Tiananmen Square, Walker's Chinese students organized a national network to stay informed, connected, and to mobilize a response. Recently, Walker co-sponsored with the Chinese Christian Scholars Association of North America a program in June 2001 that brought Chinese Scholars teaching Christianity in Chinese universities together in Boston to learn how Christians practice their faith in the U.S. During one of our sessions, the state execution of Timothy McVeigh offered opportunities to explore the Witness of faith-based communities in the U.S. to this event, and to explore as well the response of Chinese people of faith to similar executions in China. A group of Christian scholars from the U.S. will travel to China in June 2002 to explore the practice of people of faith.

Recently, at Walker's breakfast in the dining room when conference participants, international church leaders, and theology students gather for conversation an Indian pastor and his wife staying at Walker shared the story of three generations of pastoral leadership in India. Because his grandfather was moved to embrace Christianity his hometown in India has a hospital, a secondary school, and most recently, a school for the blind. Walker's programs and missions have always sought to integrate faith and action. New mission realities make old ways outdated and inappropriate, but the core values historically cherished in the telling of the story of Jesus and his love still motivates and compels us to

seek justice and assume the responsibility of the caring and nurturing of others everywhere in the World.

## Mission Resource Center

The Walker Center provides one of the best lending libraries for faith-based cross-cultural understanding and conflict resolution resources geared toward youth in the Northeast. Educators, churches, and youth leaders in the New England area increasingly use these resources for their programs. The Center has formed a partnership with the City Missionary Society to house youth groups and adults seeking meaningful volunteer opportunities in the Boston Area.

Walker's ministry of hospitality shared by its multicultural staff touches thousands of people around the world each year. Our gardens, homey atmosphere, good home-cooked food, and the openness of Walker's staff to listen and receive the gifts and stories others bring from the rich tapestry of global life help to build bridges between others and break down the dividing walls of hostility and fear. Social transformation and inner change is more likely to occur when there is a synthesis of new ideas and opportunity with old familiarity and warm memory. Every Tuesday night Walker residents gather for a community potluck. Everybody brings something familiar and tastes something new. A similar exchange happens in our conversation as we discuss world politics, the state of the church, and our own hopes and dreams.

The Walker Center has a rich past. Yet we are willing to be constantly transformed and renewed that God might use us as an instrument of God's grace in the work of seeking justice, peace, and the renewal of God's creation. This is a great challenge. We are constantly reminded that God is indeed "doing a new thing." The new thing, however, may not be rooted in traditional denominational structures or bureaucracy that we have grown up with and have familiarity. While Walker still hosts the meetings of historical established churches from the U.S. and Europe we are increasingly used by newly immigrant churches from Latin America, Africa, and Asia. We are learning much about the future shape of ministry from these groups. These days there is a lot more singing and praising, dancing and celebration, and possibly less theologizing and talk, more honesty and more action than ever before. □



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# Just One More Thing

By Betty H. Meyer



I am a strong supporter of architecture as an art and believe that all of the arts exist as entities apart from any so-called meaning or specific interpretation. Architecture does not need a referral to period or a long explanation as is often given to paintings. It is what it is... good architecture or bad architecture.

But, having said that, I am aware of architects who are clearly confused about their role in today's culture and wonder why their work has not received the recognition they feel it deserves.

There has been much written recently about the globalization of architecture. The Boston Society of Architects recently reported that a special meeting was being held for the architects in the area who are working abroad, and *Boston Architecture* editor Elizabeth Padjen commented they will be the pioneers of the next phase of globalization. "Their exported designs will resonate and affect other communities and cultures," I believe that.

But I know that globalization and the coming together of diverse cultures is still a goal for us. At present, cultures are confronting each other with a revolution of concepts and technologies, and we are unable yet to justify obvious differences or to recognize indisputable unity. This will come only when there is a fresh period of creativity and new design. Naturally many professions will need to be involved in this process, but I think the architect will have a primary role to play.

What then is the architect's role? Herbert Muschamp, critic for the *New York Times*, thinks the role of the architect is "to try to pin down ideas that are floating in the cultural atmosphere, chief among them perhaps the revolving relationship of self to the community." The community of course involves the designers of religious buildings, and I trust that they will want to join this search for a new synthesis and that their future designs will reflect a wholeness not seen before. I hope that *Faith & Form* will meet its archi-

tects and artists at this intersection and be a bridge to interculturalism. Many former icons will be supplanted as newer ones emerge; secular humanism will falter as a new sense of the Divine is expressed. Conceived in this way, the architect is not claiming to have the truth but to be an instrument of truth committed to a dialogue of discovery.

Kisho Kurokawa, the well-respected Japanese architect, in his excellent book *Intercultural Architecture*, asks if man has lost his image of God, since in all cultures he seems to be questioning what is sacred and what is profane. Kurokawa cautions against speaking of superiority or inferiority among the cultures, but that we must search for a common ground even while remaining in opposition. He calls this philosophy *sybiosis*, and insists that real cooperation is possible if the architect truly desires to understand the process.

I realize that the architect is asked to design a building that represents a particular faith. Nevertheless, I believe that this design may suggest inclusion rather than exclusion, a bringing in rather than a leaving out. I believe the design can be divorced from literalism and that a sense of cosmic transcendence can emerge. God is God. The Hindu says that all roads lead to the same summit. I truly believe that it is not only the people outside our churches who are waiting for this, but also that many of our dedicated parishioners are reassessing their theologies.

If an architect has worked through her own religious convictions, will they not be evident in her work and will she not feel that she has fulfilled her proper role? Architect Leon Krier believes that "bad architecture has to do with intellectual confusion." When the architect is confident in his role, and diligently pursues aesthetic expression, recognition will surely be his, and more than that he will have been ordained into a ministry of his own. □



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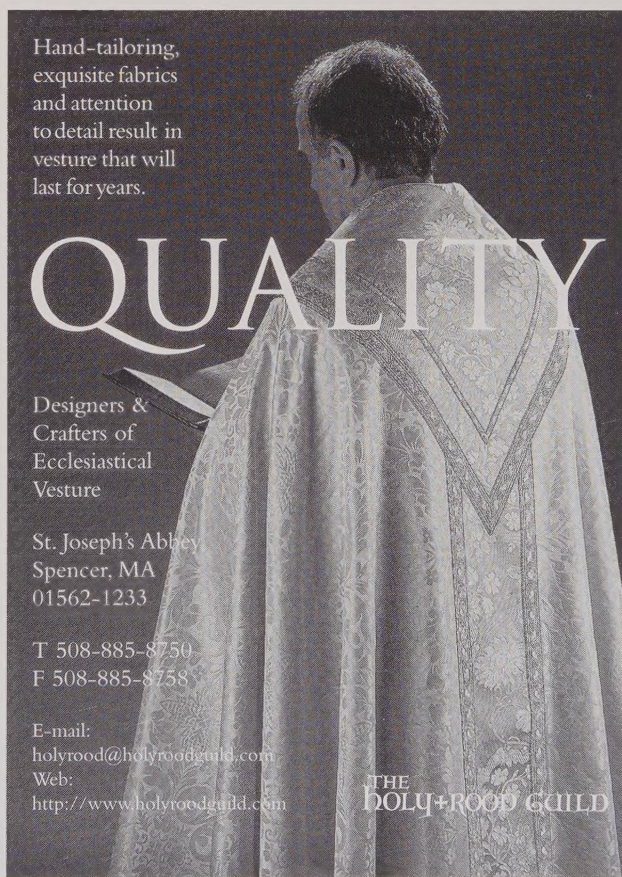
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